# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

*by Jon C. Vanden Bosch*

Since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has held a leadership position in water resources development in this country for over one hundred fifty years, it is not surprising that it has an important part to play in planning and effecting urban watershed management.

Historically, the Corps of Engineers has been involved with problems of transportation and water since the early days of the Republic. For the most part, its assignments were carried out not only with technical expertise but also with considerable attention to the needs and wishes of the general public. However, the growth of interest in environmental problems in recent decades has added much greater complexity to the problems facing the Corps and emphasizes the need to involve public opinion in the planning and execution process at all stages of any proposed project.

There is no single best way to involve the public in planning. Each study—e.g., flood control or navigation (urban or rural)—is "situation specific," and likely to involve unique technical, political, and economic elements that will influence the planner/public interaction. In earlier years, the practice was to hold a formal public hearing when a study was begun. These hearings were held during the day, and as a result public attendance was seldom very large. With increased emphasis on public involvement, planners changed from formally structured public hearings to less formal public meetings, more and more of which are being held at night or on Saturday in order to encourage attendance.

Three public meetings are now the norm for any specific study. One meeting is held during the preparation of a plan, to gather information from affected groups. The flow of information at this meeting is largely from the public to the planner, the first object being to obtain information useful in directing the study, such as identification of special problems, issues to be considered, important goals, and alternatives to them. The sec-

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ond objective is to obtain information about the political, social, and economic setting of the area, including how citizens organize to influence public issues. The third objective is to prepare both the public and the planners for more intensive involvement to follow.

A second public meeting is held when plan formulation is essentially complete, to discuss the various plans investigated. The flow of information at this meeting is two-way. Persons interested in the study, or those who might be affected, can explore the implications of each alternative for their major concerns; they become aware of various trade-offs and compromises; they express their views on the adequacy of the range of alternatives; they can suggest modifications that might improve an alternative's desirability; and they indicate which alternatives are clearly unacceptable.

A third meeting is held after the final plans have been developed in order to inform local sponsors and the general public of the results of the study.

After the third public meeting, public contact consists primarily of meetings with the local sponsoring entity until the plan is submitted to Washington. At this point it is helpful to set up citizens' groups and to hold informal workshop meetings to maintain public contact and encourage participation throughout the project.

**Public involvement techniques**

Considerable effort goes into planning a citizen participation program. In addition to cooperation and coordination with concerned federal, state, and local agencies, work groups must be formed to facilitate timely and effective citizen participation in the planning process. It is important to get the affected public involved in the decision-making stage of planning as early as possible. This involves a delicate balance of professional expertise and technical know-how with the public's needs, perceived problems, and dollars available. As I have explained, initial public involvement is achieved through three informal meetings. It is clear, however, that this method does not always accomplish its desired result. We might look at some of its successes and failures to determine what suggestions for the future emerge.

**Successes and failures**

Planners considering flood control measures for Clear Creek, on the southern edge of Houston, were surprised at the result of our citizen participation program. If we had taken into account just the formal statements presented at the public hearing, we would have concluded that the public was split about fifty-fifty on plans to provide flood control for a densely developed watershed. The results of informal workshop sessions conducted as part of the public meeting, however, and analysis of a straw poll taken at those informal workshops, indicated that the split was about 80% to 20%,

with the majority favoring some form of protection plan. As a result, we were able to develop a different approach—one which incorporates non-structural measures into the solution. This rather surprising result must be counted as a success because we received valuable information that would not have been available from the more formal usual sources.

But there have been some failures. A public meeting to consider measures for controlling shore erosion along Galveston Bay was held in the community of San Leon, southeast of Houston. The planners made extensive preparations, and approximately twenty planning representatives were on hand to assist the public, but only about four members of the public showed up. What did we do wrong here? Evidently we did not assess the public involvement needs of San Leon correctly, and consequently we did not get the public input that we were seeking. The technique that had worked so well at Clear Creek did not work at San Leon, even though it is not clear why this was so.

Therefore we may ask, are our efforts worth it? Or perhaps a better question might be, can we afford to ignore the public? The Wallisville Project is an excellent example of how lack of continuing public involvement in a program can be costly.

The Wallisville Project, located on the Trinity River east of Houston, was a multi-purpose reservoir for water supply, navigation, and recreation, which also was to provide a salinity barrier to help rice farmers. Because of lack of coordination, this $28 million multi-purpose project was halted by court injunction in 1973, after construction was about 75% complete.

The stopping of the Wallisville Project reflects the changing attitudes of a different generation of people. In retrospect, Wallisville highlights the need for more (and continuous) public involvement. Large amounts of federal funds were spent on a project formulated to satisfy desires and needs that were assessed in the early 1950s, but by the time construction began in 1966, public attitudes and public values had changed. When the project was stopped in 1973, the public had come to place much more emphasis on environmental issues and values than when the project was originally planned. A continuing contact with public opinion might have avoided the useless (as it turned out) Wallisville expenditures.

**Lessons learned and direction for the future**

We have learned that a single public involvement technique will not fit every situation and that increased public involvement is no guarantee that the planner can make everybody happy. Nonetheless, we must secure citizen participation or we are not going to stay in the water resources planning business. In effect, we must and will adapt to changing public views.